

## 'Teachers Don't Have No Feelings'? Emotional Literacy and Peer Mentoring [3600 words]

by Richenda Power [article in 'SEBDA news' Issue 13, Autumn, 2007]

*Richenda's article was inspired by attendance at a workshop given by Marie Delaney at the 2006 SEBDA UK annual conference at the University of Surrey. At that time Marie was Emotional Literacy Manager at Bower Park School, Romford, Essex.*

'Teachers don't have no feelings' was the shocked comment of Eloise, a student at Bower Park School, when I explained why I was at her school. The visit resulted from my meeting Marie Delaney, who was presenting a workshop at the 2006 SEBDA national conference<sup>i</sup>. In the workshop, Marie had asked:

"Make your mind go back to any morning you had last week. What were your feelings during the things you were doing..."

This got people talking. There were a lot of teachers and they were saying afterwards that they **never** had that chance to stop and think about how they felt. This seems the **key** to getting teachers more able to listen and to have better relationships with the students. Eloise's resonant exclamation reminded me of my own head teacher's horrified "So you have got feelings after all!" at the sight of a tear escaping my eye, when I was under threat of expulsion, many decades ago.

Feelings, owned, honoured, discarded or denied, are currently the focus of intense interest and expenditure. Schools are awash with SEAL materials. Brain research emphasises a necessary marriage of thought and feeling. Behaviour may be screened for meaning and origins in early deprivation.

Manifestations of this phenomenon are not new. Graham (2000) listed numerous preventive initiatives ('Sure Start'; 'Healthy Schools Initiative' etc) in his paper 'Mental health must be "centre stage" in child welfare'<sup>ii</sup>, remarking that 'the play performed might be called "six characters in search of an author"'. He commented: 'Some of the initiatives, especially those involving teachers, have been introduced without adequate concern for the sensitivities of the professionals concerned'.

Teachers are tasked with assisting children to develop 'Emotional Literacy' in their PHSE sessions, and, more broadly, to develop a school culture of openly dealing with emotional health issues, helping pupils understand feelings. 'Circle time', and the use of 'active listening' are familiar tools.

The emphasis on children's emotions can feel anathema to many secondary teachers who just want to get on with what they see as their central commitment, to teach French, say, or Mathematics. Their inner voices might be saying: 'Why do I have to deal with behaviour?' 'I have to be strong and perfect, managing impossible situations, with the government's mantra "target, target, target" constantly in my ears.' 'Nobody cares about how I feel.'

Working under pressure of time and target, rushing ahead to the next task or crisis without time for recovery of composure, or a moment to reflect on what has happened, can be a recipe for further or deepening difficulties. How can teachers' needs be addressed, to their benefit, and ultimately the whole school's?

Mary Morrison, head of Bower Park School, Romford<sup>iii</sup>, appointed **Marie Delaney**, as the '**Emotional Literacy Manager**', in summer 2005. You may be familiar with Marie's approaches, but may not have the opportunity that she has - to work with a

**whole school.** Her appointment differed from those usual for specialist tutors as she's not there purely for 'behaviour', 'special needs', or 'counselling', but was employed to facilitate '**an emotionally literate community**'.

### Finding feelings

You may have experienced one of Marie's workshops. A conference brochure promised she would 'draw on her long experience in Learning Support Units' and 'look at how ideas from educational therapy – in particular the works of Bion and Winnicott – can be used in mainstream schools ... [helping us] to reflect on the suspicion and even derision such ideas and approaches often evoke. What do they ask staff to face which many find difficult? And how can we overcome this resistance and make schools emotionally literate?'

'**Staff need support in their emotional role too**', Marie claimed, having found learning mentors often spoke to her about their problems with staff, rather than just talking about their pupils.

'**Why do adults and children behave as they do**' (sometimes in what seem completely irrational ways)? In her drive to answer this key question, Marie has now trained as an educational therapist at The Caspari Foundation<sup>IV</sup>. In her workshop, she got us considering teaching and therapy, wondering aloud 'Why is so difficult to bring things together?' This warmed us up for the activity central to the issue of teachers and feelings. Marie's rhetoric encouraged the therapy-shy: 'I was the most anti-therapy person on my course, and delayed therapy for myself'.

Small groups fed back contrasts they'd drawn between therapists and teachers (see table):

Therapists	Teachers
Listen	Tell/talk
Understand/	Manage behaviour
are curious re behaviour	
Curiosity=a helpful attitude	Solution-focused approach
Take time to think	Experience 'attacks on thinking' (maybe we can't bear to think about this particular child?)
Supervision helps	Know
Don't know re task	Faster
Slower	Have multiple roles

The challenge of matching the demands on teachers' behaviour, to 'Be strong', 'Be perfect' with their own real, yet often unvoiced, needs, was illustrated by Marie: she had once asked for funding for learning mentors to have supervision, only to be strongly rebuffed by heads denying money because **they** didn't have support themselves. Marie described this as an example of **an attack on thinking**. It was as if, because they couldn't make time for reflection themselves, they were saying it wasn't worth it.

Marie gave us a ten-minute taster of how she enables teachers to access and use their feelings to think more effectively, that the 'Tuesday Group' at Bower Park use for an hour a week. She explained that it was an exercise in looking at feelings, and asked us to think about where the feelings came from. '**Jot[ting] down the emotional states you experienced one morning**' produced voluminous notes.

We talked through the experience in small groups. Marie drew us back together: most were surprised by how many varieties of emotion were experienced in a short space of time, even moments of joy! Discovering some shared feelings, and the common experience of a helter skelter of emotions experienced from moment to moment each day; there was a wonderful sense of permission, being allowed to think about ourselves. Recollecting the exact context of an emotional state made it possible to understand its origin.

Marie put up some technical terms such as: **projection, transference, containment, attachment**, for us to explore. A handout helped: on Psychological Defence Mechanisms: 'Barriers to protect the personality from fear of threat/anxiety and to keep this conflict from coming to the conscious level'. As we spoke of **projection**, Gerda Hanko<sup>v</sup> recalled reassuring a teacher 'It's not meant for you', rather than saying 'Don't take it personally'. The personal response is just what we need to think about, as specific feelings are stirred up, which we can learn how to use. Sometimes we pick up whatever the children are feeling and can express it back to them in a helpful way, so that the child feels respected and heard.

As the workshop participants left Marie's session, people said how amazing it was to have time to think about their own feelings. Some were shocked that they'd only managed to describe about half an hour's experience, coming up with so much: happy anticipation, anxiety, frustration, fear, annoyance, cheer and so on. This simplest seeming of exercises had a profundity in its implications: given time to identify feelings, teachers felt valued and astonished by their own concert of emotions.

### **Emotional storms**

Marie pointed out that the children we work with would no doubt be experiencing similar cocktails of emotion, perhaps even more intensely. The demand of managing emotional life in the classroom has been recognised for a long time, but rarely is such practical management taught.

Bion referred to 'an emotional storm' in the meeting of any two personalities. What can happen is reaction off or against each other, as defence mechanisms kick in against discomfort or pain. Both the adult and the child can come away from an encounter feeling that the other doesn't understand, doesn't care, or 'don't have no feelings'. Reacting in the heat of the moment may lead to regret later. Gaining the capacity to think about what is going on guarantees a huge safety valve and a way forward for both children and adults.

After the workshop and keen to find out more, I arranged to visit Marie at work at Bower Park School.

### **The usual storm**

Young people were milling around in the sun and the wind across my path to reception on a hot July day. I pressed a buzzer, explaining I'd come to meet Miss Delaney. Once through the glass box of a secure lobby, I was told "You've just gone past her". So I popped my head out and spotted her in the middle of a group of young women loudly protesting about something upsetting them. Marie was listening carefully. I felt honoured but slightly uncomfortable about being included instantly in the process of her work, as she uncovered what had gone wrong, who was upset, why it erupted. I asked the pupils' permission, explaining why I'd come.

This first glimpse of her part in the school was of someone engaged and spontaneous, available to listen carefully to all sides of any dispute that arose,

perhaps catching a situation before it evolved into a full blown stand off or fight. But it was not just of the moment. Hearing her considered responses, it was clear that she knew each young person and some of their personal issues individually, so she made precise sense of the dynamics of the eruption. This fluid availability had also enabled her to gain insight into numerous important issues in the school as a whole, such as the arrival of newcomers.

For about an hour, Marie came and went, bringing me a sequence of pupils of all years, some alone, some in pairs or threesomes. A couple of teachers followed, before we met together to talk with headteacher Mary Morrison. I had barely interviewed her at all, but gained a kaleidoscopic view of what 'emotional literacy management' may mean in a whole school.

### **A kaleidoscope of images**

How could the school build on the first image, of the trouble-shooting role to conflict resolution, without depending on one particularly skilled and experienced person? An answer to this question came from Shona and Kylie, Eloise's '**peer mentors**'. I asked them if they used the title 'emotional literacy manager':

All, laughing: 'No, we call her "Miss"!

*R: So were you actually made peer mentors as a sort of formal thing?*

*K: Yeh.*

*S: Yes, we was chosen you see like, out of 60 people. She was in front of the year and we filled in some slips, put our names down.*

*R: So you volunteered?*

*K: Yes, it was when she started.*

*K: First of all the people that were selected all went to the training thing... I think it was for two days. Then ... it was a bit of role-play..., in various situations, what would you do,... she was just like training us.*

*S: She gave us like a booklet, just explaining things that peer mentors should do and um rules and regulations, things that you can't do*

*K: She made it really clear what was going to happen and the things we were going to do.*

*S: And what responsibilities we would have... to be a role model. You can't exactly be, you know, rough, and say, if every body's watching us, we have to be perfect all the time*

I asked Eloise how that felt and was quickly corrected by Shona: 'She's not a peer mentor, she's just come.' Eloise said 'I don't know what I am really'.

*R: I beg your pardon?*

*E: I don't know what I am.*

*K: She's not like struggling, but she has some ...*

*E: I've got problems.*

*R: Okay ... a human being.*

*K: Yes, well we're just there to like help her get over those problems.*

*R: Oh I see .*

*E: I don't know... I'd like to be...*

*R: You'd like to be a peer mentor?*

*E: It would be nice to be one but I don't know.*

*R: Well you might manage it because you're only in Year 9 now... so how do you see Marie's job?*

*E: She just helps, she helps people when they just... what happens... I go with the wrong people so she helps people to take their anger out so I don't get in trouble...*

How does the 'peer mentor' differ from a prefect? These were volunteers, encouraged to use their own experience of 'problems', drawing on these to listen and to help others. This was something to aspire to for Eloise. The nature of the 'problems' these peer mentors had experienced, Marie discussed with them as the 'black girl from Hackney comes to Romford', a social rather than a psychological 'diagnosis'. The remit of 'Emotional Literacy' felt suitably stretchy and non-pathologising.

Three young men came in succession, each with an individual story to tell. Marie introduced Jake: 'He and I've done something quite different... he might want to show you... he used to graffiti where he shouldn't graffiti ... we started talking about how to use it transformatively.'

*R: I'd never met anyone who did Miss Delaney's sort of job before and thought it was unique and newsworthy. Had you ever met someone like her before?*

*J: No..*

*R: How did she talk about what she did?*

*J: Well I only met her when like I went in the isolation room for a while... there's a teacher in there who makes sure you can't talk or nothing..., you've just got to sit there and do your work*

*R: How does it feel?*

*J: Boring. You can't even go... you can't go out... funny enough Dave went in there and they were talking about doing something about bullying... would I do a graffiti wall about bullying and all that ...it taught me, and then you know we started coming to the meetings... once a week... I done some research on the computer, like how much paint it would cost and all that. ... it was meant to go on the PE hall but like just like a big massive ... on bullying, like 'do not bully' and all this... and then she said that she wouldn't really want it outside so she said because all the pictures they've got Perspex over them.*

*R: Like protection... so they'd be your graffiti?*

*J: Yeh... I was proper happy... yes, like, I've got a business in this.. (shows me his business card) like a proper business, and I enjoy doing it as well.'*

Marie had arranged careers appointments for several pupils, again using the notion of 'Emotional Literacy' in a broadly accommodating way, enabling hope for a future.

Dave, who initiated the graffiti project, said Marie had been 'more of a counsellor sort of thing, for me', explaining that 'before she came here I was, right, in a lot of trouble and everything, and she just come in and ... when I was in isolation... because I wasn't coming in. She talked to me about why I was doing it and that. I just felt bad. And when things were bad at home I could just talk to her about it...'

Dave wanted to distinguish Marie's approach from a counsellor's:

'She makes it more... like... funny... more of a laugh: it's like I always try and stand by the door and hope I can come in here.'

Dave, and the next boy, Jon (Year 8), were proud to have met Marie on her first day in post: 'I see her on her first day and she remembered my name'; 'The first day she come here I was getting excluded' respectively. All three boys were visited by her in 'isolation', an experience they compared to imprisonment. Jon spoke of his worry that if Miss Delaney left he might find it harder to be good.

Natasha, a senior peer mentor from Year 10, told me more about 'isolation': 'It started this year; if you go there three times you get sent to Brittons in Rainham'. So some form of exclusion still occurred. Natasha spoke positively about her new role in

charge of all the mentors, and that Jon would be a peer mentor for the new year 6. Natasha had made a speech to each year group.

Jon didn't yet feel up to talking to groups, but pinpointed a significant feature of Marie's approach that had helped him return to school after several exclusions:

*J: She don't talk to you like you're an idiot.*

*R: I hope nobody talks to you like that.*

*J: Most of the teachers do, only Miss Morrison and Miss Delaney.*

*R: What's different about them?*

*J: They don't expect respect from you they give you respect in order to get it back*

*R: So it's mutual.. it's like give and take?*

*J: Yeh.*

*R: And that's made a big difference for you?*

*J: Yeh.*

### **An emotionally literate community.**

The pupils may have viewed Marie as somewhat akin to a learning mentor, but it is clear that she had a school-wide impact, building on existing initiatives by staff, such as the **peer mentoring scheme** conceived by Jacky Watford, Head of Year Ten. There'd been a **review of the leadership team**, with everyone coming together to talk. Marie helped set up a **staff group for those who'd been given leadership roles**, which was flourishing, running numerous projects across the school, e.g. to do with diversity as the local population profile changes, and community conflicts surface in school. A Science teacher, in charge of Key Stage 3, spoke of being given extra responsibility as the 'School Improvement Manager' as an exciting challenge to use her creative imagination across the whole school.

There were regular 'Tuesday Group' meetings for reflection - some said they felt like 'group therapy'. What about those teachers who might find this uncomfortable, possibly feeling exposed in a climate of enforced openness? Marie stressed that attendance was voluntary, and acknowledged that painful issues do arise, such as facing our own stereotypical thinking about ethnic and cultural diversity. The Science teacher had found talking about feelings, and any obstacles, helps staff build a good team approach throughout school. The Deputy Head spoke specifically of her use of the reflective process, as a personality who could react to a pupil's anger with strong feelings of her own. She humbly spoke of her capacity now to reflect and come back with an apology and for the relationship to develop. She reported that a recent visitor to the Group had remarked on the level of honesty and openness among the staff. Marie was convinced that this was encouraged by the head's and deputy's full participation.

But what of Marie's own input, and how did it come about? Mary Morrison, the head, made time for me at the close of the school day, just as parents were arriving for an evening meeting. She originally met Marie doing Neuro Linguistic Programming and invited her to run a staff workshop on connecting feeling and thinking. Unfortunately it was the last session before the Christmas break, so staff were rather keen to have time for 'Secret Santa' and mince pies. However, Marie's session had such an impact, they could have talked all night!

Marie emphasised her role as facilitator, in the school but not of it. Her contract had changed from 3 days a week to 6 per half term, Mary Morrison suggesting she be 'like a mirror', to 'chart the journey' of changes. What had she noticed? Pupils' concerns were to do with displacement and belonging; peer mentors were working

on issues for newcomers; one teacher was putting booklets together of pupils writing about their experiences.

How do you measure outcomes? Marie suggested looking at who is now doing what, reporting:

- all the teachers were very proactive, taking on initiatives and really leading the school;
- there were more parents putting Bower Park as their first choice school for their children, so numbers on roll were rising;
- there was a 6% rise in GCSE A-C grades as a result of more pupils being engaged in learning;
- the learning climate included teachers using 'Assessment for Learning' and 'Staff Coaching', and most INSET was now led by staff;
- Achievement Assemblies were being attended by more parents, and pupils' attitudes had changed, so it was now 'cool' to achieve.

It is significant that Marie's earlier specialism had been language teaching, as developing 'emotional literacy' is analogous to developing the power of communication in general, (or, to take a Kleinian view, is the basis itself of all language). She spoke of NLP and the tools she had shared with staff to change what they were saying, such as 'replacing the BUTS with ANDS'. An example was the transformative possibility of the graffiti behaviour, recruited into a major contribution to the school as opposed to a negative issue to be scrubbed out and punished, now preserved by perspex so the creators felt appreciated and their work valued, so others could not destroy and deface it.

Training both pupils and staff to discover and use feeling and thinking together is exactly what Marie's intervention enabled. Here was grounded link-making, that is necessary to make real social changes that so many voices demand, whilst avoiding negatively apportioning blame.<sup>vi</sup>As Jon, the Year 8 student, put it, the staff 'don't expect respect from you, they give you respect in order to get it back'.

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<sup>i</sup> 'Therapeutic Approaches in the Mainstream School' a workshop by Marie Delaney on 010406 at the 2006 SEBDA conference, 'Unattached and at Risk', University of Surrey, Guildford

<sup>ii</sup> Graham, Philip (2000) 'Mental Health must be "centre stage" in child welfare', **Archives of Disease in Childhood** vol 83:4-7 (July)

<sup>iii</sup> Bower Park School, Romford, Essex, is a mixed comprehensive school for about 750 pupils of 11 to 16 years old. The 2003 OFSTED report noted it 'takes a significant number of pupils after the normal transfer at the beginning of year 7; including significant numbers into upper school and a number who'd been excluded from other schools'; also that the 'local community have higher levels than average of unemployment and social disadvantage'.

<sup>iv</sup> The Caspari Foundation, see [www.caspari.org.uk](http://www.caspari.org.uk)

<sup>v</sup> see Hanco, Gerda 'Making psychodynamic insights accessible to teachers as an integral part of their professional task', downloadable from Caspari

<sup>vi</sup> e.g.s of 'blaming voices' see Alderson, P 'The adult's tin ear', The Guardian, 19.04.04; Batmanghelidh, C 'We fail vulnerable children because we're scared of them', The Guardian, 17.05.06 .

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